

Combating Indifference towards Aboriginal Issues in Canada

The Case of the University of Toronto

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Abstract

Ignorance among the mainstream population of the historical reality of Canada's Indigenous communities has often been cited as the leading obstacle to a successful reconciliation between these groups. This lack of knowledge and understanding of the painful experiences of the Indigenous peoples is caused by a widespread indifference at the grassroots level. Combating this indifference and promoting a meaningful process of reconciliation remain an important task for Canadian educational institutions. The purpose of this paper is to provide a broad overview of the key historical and contemporary issues that affect Aboriginal communities in Canada today, and to describe mechanisms the University of Toronto, a leading post-secondary center of learning in Canada, has put in place to fulfil this task.

1. Introduction

The year 2017 will be an important milestone in Canadian history. The country will be celebrating 150th anniversary since Confederation on July 1, 1867, the date marking the establishment of the Dominion of Canada. A series of high profile public events, academic meetings, social gatherings and cultural performances are being organized nationwide to ensure that this historical Rubicon receives the recognition it deserves both from Canadians and from international audiences. The numerous speeches we are likely to

hear from politicians and other public figures on this occasion will address Canada's achievements in critical domains, including social welfare, contribution to global peace and security, and societal diversity. Canada justly prides itself on the success of its immigration policy, tolerance and inclusiveness, which have produced the world's first officially multicultural state. While progress made in these areas is indeed impressive, another dimension of Canada's historical development will certainly be discussed with much less fanfare.

Since the first European settlers arrived in the land known today as Canada in the late 15th century, relations between colonists and the Aboriginal populations have been central to all subsequent territorial expansion and have generally affected all aspects of Canada's state building at federal, provincial and municipal levels. These relations, characterized by abuse of Indigenous peoples and a systematic destruction of their communities, culture and languages represent one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history. The legacy of residential schools and other attempts to eradicate Indigenous cultures have led to increasingly louder calls for a comprehensive re-examination of the historical treatment of the Indigenous minorities in Canada, for the creation of policies which would enable them to close economic and social gap, and for the redress of the past wrongs, perpetuated by successive Canadian governments.

The present liberal administration of Prime Minister Trudeau has made this process of reconciliation with the Aboriginal population a priority and several visible steps have been made to honor this commitment: a national public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women has been launched; the government promised to implement all recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was tasked with investigation of the experience of Indian residential schools in Canada, and on May 10, 2016 Canada adopted the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Despite the progress made, obstacles remain. At a press conference in

2016 the Mayor of Toronto John Tory commented that a major problem standing in the way of reconciliation is the lack of awareness about or interest in Aboriginal issues among the Canadian public. While most mainstream Canadians are exposed to the information about the Aboriginal populations through their high school history curriculum, the knowledge is not proportionate to the importance of this critical dimension of Canadian society.

Education sector in Canada will have to play a major role in raising public awareness of and promoting interest in aboriginal affairs, especially among young people. It is a heavy responsibility and one which requires resources, creativity and, above all, moral integrity. Beginning in the latter half of the 19th century, education, in the form of Indian residential schools, was used to break up Indigenous communities and marginalize Aboriginal culture, languages and traditions. The task this time is to harness the power of education to do the exact opposite. It is thus necessary to look carefully at what strategies Canadian educational institutions are putting in place to meet this obligation.

This paper attempts to provide an overview of how the University of Toronto, a leading post-secondary institution of Canada, and more specifically its school of education (The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) and the Department of Linguistics are advancing the knowledge of Aboriginal culture, language and communities through curricular innovation and network building.

The first sections of this paper will offer a historical overview with a focus on the legacy of residential schools and social problems of Indigenous communities. Three initiatives undertaken by the University of Toronto – an undergraduate course on Aboriginal languages revitalization; a program of meetings with the elders and the Indigenous Education Network – will be described with a view to assess their effectiveness in fulfilling the reconciliation mandate. Finally, we will consider what further steps educators can make to reduce indifference towards the Aboriginal peoples and promote a relationship based on factual understanding of history, mutual respect and

the embrace of common goals as Canadians.

2. Background

2.1 Terminology: 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous', 'Indian', 'First Nations', 'Métis' or 'Inuit'?

We use "Indigenous people" and "Aboriginal people" interchangeably as general terms for people whose ancestors have been residing on the land now called Canada since the time before the first arrival of settlers from Europe. It includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

First Nations is a term used to describe various Indigenous peoples in Canada who are not Métis or Inuit. Métis are people with mixed background of First Nations such as Ojibwe and Cree, and European ancestry such as French or Scottish. Inuit, plural of Inuk, are the Indigenous people of North American Arctic region.

"Indians" is often used for "First Nations" in Canada because the Indian Act is the basis of the legal status of First Nations Peoples in Canada. Indians who are registered under the Indian Act of Canada are Registered Indians, and Indians who belong to a First Nation that signed a treaty with the Crown are called Treaty Indians. Both groups are called Status Indians, and collectively represent three-quarters of the total Indian population of Canada. (Statistics Canada, 2011) The remaining Indian population is considered 'non-status.'

2.2 Aboriginal Population

In 2011, 1,400,685 people, or 4.3% of Canada's population, claimed Aboriginal identity (Natl. Household Survey of Canada (NHS), 2011). First Nations account for 60.8% (851,560), while Métis and Inuit are 32.3% (451,795), and 4.2% (59,445) respectively. The Aboriginal population is growing rapidly. Over a 15-year period from 1996 to 2011 it has risen by almost 50%. The increase between 2006 and 2011 is 20.1% (232,385 people), which is almost four times higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population.

Of First Nations people with registered Indian status (637,660), nearly half (49.3%) live on Indian reserves or settlements. Most Métis (84.8%) live in the western provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, B.C., Saskatchewan) and Ontario. Nearly three-quarters (73.1%, 43,460) of Inuit live in Inuit Nunangat 'traditional homeland', mainly in northern Canada. (See Appendix 1 for further details on the Aboriginal population distribution.)

An important feature of Canada's Aboriginal population is that this group is young relative to the non-Indigenous population. This is mainly due to higher fertility rates and shorter life expectancy. (Statistics Canada) Aboriginal children aged 14 and under made up 28.0% of the total Aboriginal population and 7.0% of all children in Canada. Non-Aboriginal children aged 14 and under represented 16.5% of the total non-Aboriginal population. A little less distinctive yet a similar tendency can be observed among the youth aged 15 to 24. Aboriginal youth of this age group represented 18.2% of the total Aboriginal population, and 5.9% of all youth in Canada. Non-Aboriginal youth of this age group accounted for 12.9% of the total non-Aboriginal population. (*NHS 2011*).

3. Social Issues

Any discussion of the present-day status of Indigenous communities in the Canadian political and economic context must necessarily focus on a number of social issues. The following list, while far from being exhaustive, outlines some of the key concerns to Aboriginal groups.

3.1 Suicide

Suicide rates are five to seven times higher for Aboriginal youth than for non-Aboriginal youth. Suicide rates among Inuit youth are among the highest in the world, at 11 times the national average. (Health Canada, 2016) Many experts believe that long history of colonization and forced assimilation exemplified by residential school system are responsible for stress, psychological disorders and marginalization among the Aboriginal population (Partridge,

2011). The legacy of residential schools is especially problematic since the trauma of forced separation from one's family and cultural environment produces a multigenerational effect, which can manifest itself in higher incidence of suicide and criminal behavior.

3.2 Living arrangement and overrepresentation in foster care

Evidence clearly indicates that the family environment of Aboriginal children is very alarming. Aboriginal youth are overrepresented among children in foster care. Many of them are staying with non-Aboriginal families lacking regular access to their own languages, culture and tradition.

Almost half (48.1%) of all children aged 14 and under in foster care were Aboriginal children. Nearly 4% of Aboriginal children were foster children compared to 0.3% of non-Aboriginal children. (NHS, 2011) Foster family system is ongoing to support Indigenous families in need, including those of residential school survivors, but the success of this system has been mixed. While all residential schools have been closed, the foster family system for Indigenous population has had a very similar effect: removing Aboriginal youth from their socio-cultural and linguistic environments and raising them on norms and values which are often markedly different.

3.3 Education

Educational attainment is perhaps one of the most important indicators of the disparity between the Aboriginal and mainstream populations of Canada. Evidence points to four distinct patterns.

1. Mainstream population is generally better educated. Less than one-half (48.4%) of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 had a postsecondary qualification in 2011. (*NHS in Brief, 2011*) In comparison, almost two-thirds (64.7%) of the non-Aboriginal population of the same age group had one. Moreover, of this group, 26.5% of non-Aboriginal people had a university degree, while fewer than 10% of Indigenous people completed university.

2. Younger Aboriginal people have a higher level of educational attain-

ment than older generation. Those aged 35 to 44 were more likely to have college diplomas than a 55 to 64 year-old demographic.

3. Non-status Indians had a higher educational level than Status Indians. In the First Nation population, those *without* Registered or Treaty Indian status had a higher rate of postsecondary graduates than those *with* the status.

4. Also, among First Nations with Registered or Treaty Indian status, the proportion of postsecondary graduates was higher for those living off reserve than on reserve.

While a number of programs containing financial incentives, have been implemented at both federal and provincial levels to encourage Aboriginal youth to pursue post-secondary education, limited attainment levels relative to mainstream Canadians continue to adversely impact their social progress. Due to formal educational underachievement, Indigenous Canadians have considerably fewer opportunities in the labor market and continue to be overrepresented in low-wage, low-skill employment. A low percentage of university diploma holders impairs not only economic but also social mobility for the First Nations communities. Education, and particularly post-secondary formal training, as the vehicle for social advancement is not readily acknowledged by the Aboriginal groups. This issue needs to be addressed before any equality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups can be realized.

3.4 The current status of indigenous languages

Canada is home to more than 600 First Nations/Indian bands in Canada and over 60 aboriginal languages - an indication of the diversity of First Nations people across the country. Many of these languages are on the verge of extinction, without sufficient numbers of speakers capable of transmitting the necessary linguistic knowledge to the next generation. According to the 2011 National Household Survey (*NHS 2011 Aboriginal peoples and Language*), 240,815 Aboriginal people, or 17.2% of the population who claimed Aboriginal identity, responded that they were able to conduct a conversation in an Aboriginal language. This compares to 21.0% of respondents who

claimed this proficiency in 2006. At the same time, the total population claiming Aboriginal identity increased by 20.1%. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that these linguistic systems are constrained by the absence of written forms thus forcing speakers to play a very important role in preserving the language, and cultural history which it represents, for future generations.

One of the features of many Indigenous languages in Canada is their oral tradition in educating young generations. Indigenous people have been handing down their knowledge and skills through practical demonstrations and explanations taking into account the appropriate age of the learners. This process has been traditionally done orally by elders, resource persons or teachers in each clan, or a family with a specific role in the community. Elders use oral language to articulate their traditional worldview through storytelling, and in doing so ensure the passage of the accrued wisdom of generations before them.

Education in Indigenous societies is experiential and personal. It is typically done by experiencing the real world and the different phases of these informal educational processes are attuned to the mental and emotional development level of children. This approach contrasts sharply with the pedagogical traditions of Euro-Christian cultures where instruction is mainly delivered to groups of same-age students simultaneously in a classroom setting using written materials.

Canada is a multicultural society with a strong tradition of preservation of heritage cultures and languages, and it is important to nurture this diversity. However, one critical difference between immigrants' languages and Indigenous languages is that the former have a historical home outside of Canada. Thus, revitalization of Indigenous languages should be considered by educators and policy makers as an important and urgent mission.

3.5 The Legacy of residential schools

The establishment of the residential school system was based on the government's belief that Indigenous people would be successful only by

replacing their own traditions, culture, and languages with Euro-Christian culture and English or French as means of communication. Throughout the period of colonization, Indigenous communities were not recognized as equal ethno-cultural entities and colonial leaders considered rapid and complete assimilation into the settler mainstream as the most effective way of resolving the 'Indian problem.' John A. Macdonald, the first Canadian Prime Minister, expressed hope that soon there would be no Aboriginal people in Canada. (Parmelee, 1887) Duncan Campbell Scott, then the deputy superintendent general of the Department of Indian Affairs commented on Indian problem in 1920, "Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic" (Historical Development of the Indian Act. 1978).

The school system was envisioned as a network of church-run boarding institutions, which would transform Aboriginal children into individuals culturally congruent with white Christian settlers. This type of institution already existed as early as the 17th century, but the success in providing basic education to Aboriginal children was limited. Schools could not offer education which Indigenous parents wanted their children to receive in order to survive in a new social system controlled by the newcomers. At the same time the newcomers did not have the power to impose educational mandate on Indigenous people, so the relationship of these two groups was more or less mutually dependent. (Residential Schools, *Historica Canada*, the *Canadian Encyclopedia*) However, after the Canadian Confederation in 1867, the federal government became directly involved in the management of these educational facilities. With the passage of the Indian Act in 1876, education of Indigenous youth became government responsibility. In 1880s, the government began funding residential schools. In 1920, under the Indian Act, it became compulsory for all Indian children to attend a residential school (Indigenous Foundations).

In the 1930s, the system reached its peak with 80 residential schools. In total, 130 government-operated residential schools existed in every province

and territory across Canada except for Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, where the government assumed Indigenous people there had been already assimilated enough into the dominant culture. (CBC News. 2008, May 16)

In total, 30% or 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to attend residential schools, and many of them, at least 3,200 children, died there (Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 (*Final Report*)). The actual number of deaths in residential schools could be five to ten times larger but due to poor record-keeping the exact number could not be determined (Final Report, 2015). It is clear, however, that the ratio of death of Indigenous children of this generation is much higher than that of non-Indigenous children (Final Report, 2015).

The general experience of residential school students was not a happy one. Former students spoke of physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse by the staff. Their meals were subpar both in quality and quantity; they were given inadequate clothing, academic programs were basic and teachers were often not well-trained, vocational training was mainly for household chores and often just for running the school itself (Indigenous Foundation). Most importantly, students were isolated from their own families and communities, even from their siblings in the same school, and their tradition, culture, and values were disparaged. These experiences have left students traumatized, insecure of their own identity in society and without a firm cultural or moral anchor to guide them through life (Final Report, 2015).

One of the most damaging effects of the residential school system was the disappearance of entire communities, of generational linkages which have resulted in the loss of language and more broadly, the disintegration of family units. In the 1960s, the federal government in an effort to address the disruptions caused by the residential schools began taking Indigenous children away from home to the foster care or to be adopted by non-Indigenous families. The end-result of this misguided initiative was only to exacerbate the situation by separating parents and children as residential schools did (Final

Report, 2015).

Many of residential school survivors are reluctant to speak or teach their native languages to the younger generation because at schools they were punished for speaking them. Moreover, many of them are suffering from mental problems caused by traumatic experiences at residential schools. On a broader scale, many Indigenous people are struggling with socio-economic problems, loss of identity and low self-esteem caused by the assimilation policy the Canadian government pursued for almost 100 years.

Scientific evidence shows that traumatic experiences at a young age can cause psychological and physical problems in the future, not only to those who experienced the trauma, but also to their descendants (Final Report, 2015). These problems, including violence, suicides, crime, drug abuse, homelessness, alcoholism, and a high school dropout rate are prevalent in Indigenous communities. Even more alarming is that these problems are often an inter-generational phenomenon, perpetuating a vicious cycle of economic marginalization, educational underperformance, and abusive behavior.

3.6 Treaties and land issues

Over the course of colonial history in Canada, individual Indigenous nations or groups of nations have had treaties with the Crown, as independent but equal political allies or trade partners. However, in the process of establishment of Canada as a sovereign country, the federal government changed the status of these treaties from 'nation-to-nation' pacts to 'province-to-nation' agreements without consultation or consent of Indigenous partners. The importance of this unilateral decision cannot be overestimated. Indigenous nations have been politically absorbed into the Canadian system of government and their status was no longer considered to be that of equal partners (Indigenous Foundation).

Cultural differences in the notions of land ownership between Indigenous communities and European settlers is also at the base of misunderstanding and conflict. For Indigenous people Land is the center of their ecosystem as

well as the core of their spiritual, cultural and social existence. This special relationship to the Land is fundamental in many ways to the very survival of the Indigenous lifestyle. As a result, selling land without retaining some rights to its resources, or completely giving up the symbolism it represents in the spiritual sense, is contrary to the norms of Aboriginal culture. In Western worldview, however, land is an asset to be utilized, traded and developed as necessary (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

3.7 Stereotypes

Grassroots understanding of history, culture and painful experiences of the Aboriginal communities is hindered by a number of factors, of which the most influential is, arguably, stereotypes caused and exacerbated by lack of systematic education. Stereotypes of Indigenous people articulated through phrases such as “fierce warriors”, “aggressive”, “savage”, “drunk”, “obese”, “wise elder” and “romantic episode of Indian princess” are widespread. These images perpetuate entrenched sets of attitudes which reflect an inaccurate and misleading understanding of the stereotypical Indian as perceived historically and the image of the modern-day Indian. King, a well-known Indigenous writer, names the former ‘dead Indians’ and the latter ‘live Indians’ or ‘inconvenient Indians’ (King, 2013). Real Indians are often ‘invisible’ in modern society (Deloria 1988), which means their reality is not understood nor even acknowledged by others. Terms ‘inconvenient’ and ‘invisible’ aptly encapsulate the pervasive mainstream attitudes towards the Aboriginal communities in their midst. These attitudes are in most cases not based on personal experiences or familiarity gained through study but are the by-product of ignorance and an unfounded conviction of righteousness. Indians stereotypes are creating wrong – both negative and not overtly-negative – images of Indigenous people and distorting reality of their lives and concerns. Lack of knowledge about Indigenous people also perpetuates further stereotypes, and as a result dehumanizes them. Furthermore, the stereotypes imposed from outside result in prejudice and discrimination, and finally become a self-fulfill-

ing prophecy. This internal rationalization fuels further stereotype formation (Restoule, 2015). Without breaking the vicious circle, the real healing of Indigenous people and communities has little chance of success.

3.8 *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Final Report*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established by Order-in-Council in June 2008, as part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). It was intended to investigate critically all facts surrounding the residential school system and to make recommendations for the real reconciliation process. In the course of their inquiry the Commission interviewed more than 6,000 witnesses of residential schools, most of whom were former students. A number of national and regional events had been organized to raise awareness among the general public of the work of this Commission. A National Research Centre for Truth and Reconciliation was created to serve as the permanent home of all documentation relevant to the seven-year inquiry (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

On December 15, 2015, *The Final Report: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* was released. The following part of the Preface to this document presents a succinct overview of the Commission's mandate:

"The stories of that experience are sometimes difficult to accept as something that could have happened in a country such as Canada, which has long prided itself on being a bastion of democracy, peace, and kindness throughout the world. ...But, shaming and pointing our wrongdoing were not the purpose of the Commission's mandate. Ultimately, the Commission's focus on truth determination was intended to lay the foundation for the important question of reconciliation. Now that we know about residential schools and their legacy, what do we do about it?"

As a crucial part of its report, the Commission makes 94 specific recommendations applied to all spheres of daily life. The goal of these 'Calls to

Action' is to expedite the process of reconciliation with the Indigenous communities and help achieve equality among all Canadians through a series of concrete and measurable steps. The importance of education about Aboriginal issues is directly mentioned in this report but a greater awareness of the Indigenous reality, past and present, is vital for realizing many of the 94 recommendations.

3.9 Actions by the federal government

While recent actions and policies of the Canadian government point to the political willingness to come to a reconciliation and move forward as a united nation, Canada's path to this position had been circular.

On September 13, 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted in the UN General Assembly by an overwhelming majority. Canada was one of the four states that opposed it. While Canada had already started to take actions for reparations for the residential school survivors and tackle other issues related to Indigenous people's welfare, internationally the government was unwilling to concede the fact that Canada had intentionally pursued a policy of colonialism and the rights of Indigenous people had been grossly violated. It took nearly a decade for Canada to sign the UNDRIP.

The ambivalence to admit or not to acknowledge the wrongdoing can also be seen in the statements made by former PM Harper. In 2008 he officially apologized to the Indigenous peoples in Canada for the history of residential schools, but next year at the G20 Summit in Philadelphia he proudly announced, "Canada has no history of colonialism." (Ljunggren, 2009)

The federal election campaign of 2015 provides a useful opportunity to assess the attitudes of Canada's political leaders towards the current state of Indian affairs. The three candidates representing the major political parties in Canada articulated their views on key concerns related to the Aboriginal communities: high incidence of violence towards indigenous women; redress for residential school survivors; educational underperformance of the Aborigi-

nal youth and the issue of land claims.

All then-candidates expressed their concern about Indigenous issues and were aware of their urgency, however there were notable differences in their platforms. Mulcair, leader of the National Democratic Party (NDP) and Trudeau, the head of the Liberal Party, said that they would launch immediate action to improve the status of Indigenous people such as a public inquiry into the cases of the murdered and missing Indigenous women and investment into education for Indigenous youth. Conservative Party's Harper ruled out the option of a public inquiry while promising action plans to reduce violence against Indigenous women and to improve education for Indigenous youth. In terms of redress for residential school survivors all candidates made a commitment to consider the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as an important vehicle for policy-making process. At the same time, Mulcair and Trudeau vowed to honor Canada's international obligation to support Indigenous rights, while Harper did not mention this point at all during his electoral campaign (Federal Election 2015: the Issues: First Nations' Priorities. 2015).

The most striking contrast among the three leading candidates could be seen in their respective positions on the Indigenous land issue. This issue, more than any other in the thorny process of domestic reconciliation, proved to be polarizing for Canadian stakeholders. Land ownership, long contested by the First Nations, impacts Canada's resource development and environmental policy as well as the treaties and rights of Indigenous people. NDP and Liberals promised to make Indigenous people integral participants in all discussions related to land development including pipeline and mining projects. Conservatives, however, reconfirmed their support of oil-sand development and pipeline project in Alberta, and made it clear that development of resource infrastructure would be a central plank in their energy policy. (Federal Election 2015: the Issues: First Nations' Priorities. 2015).

Liberals won the election in a landslide drawing broad support from all regions of the country. The election brought to power a relatively young,

charismatic leader whose commitment to make the society more inclusive was welcomed by both the leaders of Aboriginal communities and by the environmental groups.

Land and resource development issue divided Canadians politically and geographically. Conservatives were supported in Alberta and communities where resource development was crucial for the local economy. Natural resource development projects such as oil pipelines have been a vital part of both local and national economies and will continue to play this critical role at least for the foreseeable future. At the same time, however, environmental groups and Indigenous leaders warn about a risk of land and water pollution, threats to biodiversity and violations of land treaties. As the new government has to demonstrate its commitment to a more inclusive partnership with the Indigenous Canadians and at the same time, deliver on its promise to promote the economic well-being of resource-rich areas of Canada, Trudeau faces a delicate balancing act.

So far, the Liberal government has taken a number of visible steps to showcase its support of Indigenous people. Trudeau appointed Jody Wilson-Raybould as Justice Minister, the first indigenous minister of Law in the federal cabinet. This appointment is quite symbolic because Trudeau promised that his government would carry out a comprehensive legislative review to correct inequalities. The government launched a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women. It promised \$8.4 billion for the next five years to support Indigenous Peoples, including over \$4.2 billion for education, children and training of Indigenous youth (Government of Canada, 2016).

On May 10th, 2016, Canada officially ratified the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The historic event was attended by Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Bennett and Justice Minister Wilson-Raybould, which underscores the importance Canadian government attaches to this document. It was welcomed by the international and domestic communities, yet with a little surprise that Canada was the last UN member to adopt this milestone declaration.

Recently, the Canadian government has made relations with the Aboriginal community a priority and concrete actions have been put in place to expedite this process of national reconciliation. The Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, has been promoting steps to improve the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to create a greater common knowledge of both difficulties and success stories, through SNS, and strategic events. In her video message on National Aboriginal Day 2016 Minister Bennett stated, "We cannot undo history, but as Canadians, we can all learn from it." (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada).

On December 6th, 2016, at the Annual Assembly of First Nations, the Indigenous leaders acknowledged Trudeau's policies as a meaningful initial step toward national reconciliation but cautioned that the success of this undertaking will be contingent on the sustained pursuit of these policies and the political will to allocate the necessary resources in times of competing priorities.

At a press conference in Ottawa on December 15th, 2016, marking one year since the publication of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Trudeau commented that 36 to 45 Calls to Action out of 94 had been addressed in the previous year. The first year of the new government witnessed initial positive steps to lay the framework for Indigenous reconciliation. With the structure in place, it will be important to see in this coming year whether there will be collective buy-in from all sectors of Canadian society to move toward practical implementation of promises and recommendations made.

4. Indigenous Education at the University of Toronto

Obviously, combating indifference toward and ignorance of the historical and modern realities of the Aboriginal communities in Canada begins with systematic efforts to enhance the awareness of these realities among the general public. In the following sections we will focus on some of the steps undertaken by the University of Toronto to raise the visibility of Indigenous

culture among students and to broaden linkages between the Aboriginal and mainstream populations.

It is not very difficult for students who are not majoring in Aboriginal study or anthropology to find courses that deal with Indigenous affairs or languages at the University of Toronto both at undergraduate and graduate levels. If a student with an unrelated major is interested in Indigenous affairs there are many opportunities to learn about it; but if not, the exposure will likely be very limited as none of these course offerings are mandatory. Recognizing its role in advancing the process of Indigenous reconciliation, the University has launched new programs beyond its conventional curriculum to promote a more meaningful dialogue on Aboriginal issues.

We chose three initiatives as illustrative examples of programs that seek to transmit first-hand knowledge about Indigenous affairs to a wider audience. These mechanisms of information dissemination and network building, taught or guided by Indigenous faculty, represent three forms of programs: an elective course on revitalizing languages, an Indigenous Education Network, and an extra-curricular program of informal meetings with the traditional community leaders (elders).

4.1 'Revitalizing Languages' Course

The Department of Linguistics introduced 'Revitalizing Languages' in 2016, as an elective course for undergraduate students. This lecture course is taught by a professor with Indigenous background. The Department has been offering several indigenous languages courses such as Ojibwe, but the new course is unique in offering students more comprehensive socio-cultural information with the main focus on making the students understand the urgency of revitalizing indigenous languages. This theme is new not only to participants but probably to most of the general public in Canada. We identified three critical junctures of the course.

First of all, the instructor describes Canadian history and society from the perspective of First Nations. Most of the students in this class who had

followed a standard provincial high school curriculum have already acquired basic knowledge about Indigenous people in Canada. However, a majority of participants in the class seemed to feel that the Indigenous reality was disconnected from their own lives and approached it in a detached, clinical way. The key objective of the course is to bridge this gap and make students more conscious of the interwoven fabric of Canadian society.

The course also addresses contemporary issues related to Indigenous population such as school dropout rate, stereotypes of Indigenous people, dehumanization of Indigenous population, and official as well as grassroots movements to support Indigenous communities and residential school survivors. To heal the wounds of the past and regain self-esteem and identity of First Nations, revitalizing their languages is presented as one of the most important and urgent tasks.

Secondly, the course introduces actual examples of linguistic revitalization programs in the world such as Aboriginal Language Program Planning in British Columbia (Canada) and Hawaiian Language Immersion Program (US), as well as explanation of theories behind methodologies of language revitalization including immersion program, Language Nest, Master-Apprentice for adults, and language camps. The instructor stresses the importance of assessing the status of a target language and the resources available in order to utilize the best strategy as revitalization remedy.

Pedagogically, the course represents a departure from the conventional curriculum in which a majority of general linguistics and sociology courses tend to present the information in a more abstract way divorced from students' immediate daily lives. The objective of this course as highlighted by the instructor, is to make students, whatever their backgrounds and specializations may be, agents of change. The instructor appeals to students to use their new knowledge proactively, not only to enhance their own understanding but to apply it for social betterment.

The work students are expected to perform in this course reflects this objective. The assignments are generally practical and require students to

think of innovative solutions to real problems, such as drawing up a proposal for an awareness campaign project for revitalization of indigenous languages, including possible fundraising mechanisms, etc.

4.2 The Indigenous Education Network (IEN)

The Indigenous Education Network (IEN) has its home in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. IEN, currently headed by a professor with Indigenous background, comprises a group of students, university faculty and staff, and community members at large 'who share a common commitment to and passion for Indigenous education and research' (IEN, 2016).

The purpose of the IEN is to support students and their study interests in Indigenous education, to advance education research on Indigenous issues, to actively encourage the development of Indigenous curriculum, and to promote relevant initiatives in collaboration with stakeholders (IEN, 2016).

IEN monthly meetings are typically attended by 10 to 20 participants. Usually most come to the meeting to make announcements about upcoming events, to report on past events and projects, share information of broader interest within the IEN, and exchange opinions. Meetings begin with a sage smudging ceremony, a traditional opening ceremony of many Indigenous communities, meant to purify the venue and the participants' minds and souls, then proceed to self-introduction of participants, announcements and discussion. All members are expected to play a role in disseminating the information throughout their own networks mainly among colleagues in their respective occupational fields.

Topics addressed at the meetings vary. Representatives of First Nations House, an office to support Indigenous students at the University of Toronto, are among regular attendees and they announce and discuss their programs and events to raise awareness of Indigenous issues. Information is also made available about events of special interest to Indigenous students. The value of these monthly meetings is not limited to the information exchange – after all,

this function is more effectively fulfilled through a mailing list. Face-to-face interactions of people from different social and professional milieux, united in their interest in and often commitment to the cause of the Indigenous minorities, creates a snowballing effect of awareness and serves to transform participants from passive observers to more active doers. This diverse attendance underscores the complexity and the multifaceted nature of the Indigenous issues that need to be approached from many complementary perspectives.

Information sharing and networking is the artery of the IEN. The coordinator of the group frequently sends out information to members about upcoming events, programs, positions, and general news about Indigenous affairs. The sheer volume of online exchanges and announcements points to the vibrancy of academic, social and professional organizations involved with Indigenous people and the existence of multiple networks which serve a large nationwide community.

4.3 Elders

Two elders are pivotal figures at OISE. Both are inspiring individuals with a wealth of cultural information they readily share.

Elder A is a traditional teacher and healer, and in his capacity as a 'Traditional Elder' he is active in many institutions across the University of Toronto system. He is a Cayuga. Cayuga was one of Haudenosaunee confederacy, and now belongs to Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation in Ontario. The elder has a number of responsibilities: giving a lecture series to students about Indigenous worldviews, conducting opening ceremonies for meetings and conferences, and as a resource person at OISE/IEN chairing weekly free discussion sessions with students and visitors from outside the University. He also delivers regular talks and lectures at Law and Medical Schools.

Elder B is of Ojibwe ancestry and is a member of Shawanaga First Nation on the East Shore of Georgian Bay She is an Ojibwe traditional teacher

and Ojibwe traditional *kokomis* (grandmother). She is a singer, dancer, songwriter, and a traditional Ojibwe storyteller. As an elder on campus, she performs traditional ceremonies, conducts lessons and workshops about Indigenous customs, and is often involved as a singer or storyteller at related events. She spent many difficult years at a residential school but has succeeded in preserving the knowledge of her native culture.

Elders typically play the role of traditional resource persons, and teachers of an Indigenous community to guide people using their holistic wisdom of life. They usually have a good knowledge of history, and of the Aboriginal way of life, and are able and willing to share this memory with the community outsiders. Each area of knowledge contributes to the mosaic of the Indigenous worldview which has been passed orally to the next generation.

During the meetings elders rely on their memory to describe their past and share cultural information. They demonstrate an astonishing ability to recall names, places, events, and stories and the sensitivity to introduce them at the appropriate time and place for the audience.

One of the most important messages delivered by elders is that language cannot survive without connection to nature and neither can human beings. Humans are part of nature, not its conquerors. Elders often talk of the importance of the relationship between natural phenomena around us and humans; how human beings have interpreted and coexisted with nature. The talks of the elders suggested very clearly that the accumulated wisdom of the Aboriginal communities can be a very powerful resource in dealing with the environmental and social challenges we face today, and that this collective memory must play a key role in any approach Canada will take in tackling these problems. This transfer of knowledge through a series of informal talks emphasized another vital dimension of the need to understand and preserve Indigenous cultural heritage: it is of great public interest to all Canadians, and especially to the future generations.

5. Conclusion

It is very encouraging that a number of concrete, positive changes aimed at enhancing the visibility of Indigenous issues, are taking place. At various events held in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada MCs, hosts, and speakers customarily acknowledge that the sites where they stand are the land of Indigenous people. All schools of the Toronto District School Board started a similar practice of 'land acknowledgement' at the beginning of the 2015 school year. Schools and universities nationwide have instituted support programs for Indigenous youth to close the gaps in academic achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Two institutions – the University of Winnipeg and Lakehead University – have made courses on Aboriginal issues compulsory (Macdonald, 2015). Regular Indigenous cultural events and academic conferences celebrate the richness of Indigenous culture and traditions. All forms of mainstream media continue to devote considerable coverage to the examination of issues related to the Indigenous communities. Perhaps even more importantly, the general public seems to be more engaged in the discussion of Aboriginal problems and are showing increased interest in Aboriginal culture. Documentaries exploring life, culture and identity of Indigenous people are very well attended and receive standing ovations from audiences.

While this trend is very important as an intermediary step in raising awareness of the First Nations, the question is how this momentum can be sustained and what advocacy strategy should be implemented to raise the level of engagement further. Awareness of the issues at stake does not necessarily translate into a practical discussion about the reality of Indigenous people. The question remains how this new knowledge can be channeled into a progressive course of action.

One of the limitations of the programs we have discussed is that the knowledge about Indigenous people is often shared by and among only those who are already interested in it. The next challenge is to identify ways to

engage broad segments of the general public, including those who are either manifestly disinterested in the question of Indigenous minorities, or harbor negative attitudes towards Aboriginal groups. Educational institutions at both secondary and post-secondary levels have a critical role to play in this process. While their involvement will obviously be constrained by shrinking resources and competing priorities, we believe the following steps will be effective in making public debate on Indigenous issues more inclusive and informed.

- i . making at least some courses on Aboriginal culture or history (or a course with 50% Aboriginal content) required for all freshmen in teachers' colleges in Canada. There is evidence that some Canadian universities are already considering changes in this direction. The Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has mentioned the prospect of mandatory courses on Indigenous issues for all students of OISE (IEN orientation, 2016); however, the definite timeline is yet to be determined. Systematic exposure of Canadian youth to the history and culture of Aboriginal peoples, focusing on the tortuous relationship between Aboriginal communities and settlers as represented by various levels of government is paramount to the success of the reconciliation process.
- ii . organizing targeted academia-industry events to promote more cross-sharing of knowledge about Aboriginal lifestyle and traditional culture which has application for contemporary society. This is particularly relevant in areas of environment and medicine for the discussion of sustainable farming methods; treatment of chronic diseases; etc.
- iii . fostering champions among successful Aboriginal professionals who can serve as liaison between the Indigenous communities and mainstream population. Involving elders is a step in this direction but the initiative should be expanded to include representatives of many occupational groups in order to establish a broad web of cross-sec-

tional linkages.

Implementing these steps will require sustained focus and will on the part of the university administrators, curriculum designers and faculty. There are numerous stakeholders involved and their priorities will necessarily diverge at certain points of the process; however, if Canadian institutions are committed to producing agents of change for our society, these challenges should not stand in the way of efforts to achieve a successful partnership of all people as befitting Canada's 150th anniversary.

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Appendix I

Selected Aboriginal population statistics

Aboriginal population distribution by provinces and territories:

Ontario	21.5% of total Aboriginal people
BC	16.6%
Alberta	15.8%
Man.	14.0%
Sask.	11.3%

(Source: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit: 2011 National Household Survey (NHS); Social and Aboriginal Statistics. September 16, 2013, Statistics Canada.)

Aboriginal population ratio per total provincial population

Nunavut	86.3% of total Nunavut population
North West Territory	51.9% of NWT
Yukon T	23.1% of YT
Manitoba	16.7% of Man.
Saskatchewan	15.6% of Sask.

(Source: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit: 2011 National Household Survey (NHS); Social and Aboriginal Statistics. September 16, 2013, Statistics Canada.)

Aboriginal population by urban area

Winnipeg (Man.)	68,385
Edmonton (Alta.)	52,100
Vancouver (B.C.)	40,310
Calgary (Alta.)	26,575
Toronto (Ont.)	26,575
Saskatoon (Sask.)	21,535
Ottawa-Gatineau (Ont.)	20,590

(Source : Population by Aboriginal group, by metropolitan area (2006 Census).